Haller, Unzer, and Science as Process

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Abstract: Imagining human beings as “ontological centaurs” Howard Tuttle argues in Human Life is Radical Reality that humans have a biological nature but that their fundamental essence lies in the activity of the mind. Eighteenth-century physiologists Albrecht von Haller and Johann August Unzer viewed the balance of the dualistic human existence differently. Haller employed experiment and hypotheses to describe more closely the three forces of contractility, irritability, and sensibility that regulate muscle movement. These forces highlight the ability of the body to react without a soul or consciousness. In his challenging synthesis of physiology and Baumgartian empirical psychology, Unzer redefined traditional terminology to emphasize the biological sources of sensation and thought. He thus conceived of thought as embodied. Even if neither physician pursued a theory of life force (Lebenskraft), the value of their work in the present context lies in their linking of biological nature to reason and volition.

In chapter ten, “The Directions of Human Life,” of Human Life is Radical Reality, Howard Tuttle strongly differentiates humans’ biological nature from their existence as self-activating rational subjects. He argues with José Ortega y Gasset that while biological nature is a necessary condition of embodied life, it is not a sufficient condition to explain the life of a self-creating subject in history. Tuttle clearly finds the essence of the human in the activities of the mind. Nonetheless, humans are inescapably both physical and conceptual, and in recognition of this dualistic existence, he imagines human beings as “ontological centaurs.”

This metaphor prioritizes the intellectual and obscures the indebtedness of thought and volition to biological processes. In their mixed being, half horse and half man, centaurs were generally known for their violence and the prominence of their animal drives. Chiron was the exception, a centaur known for intelligence and wisdom. Tuttle’s metaphor implies a common biological and instinctual basis for centaurs and humans while leaving open their potential to develop wisdom. The metaphor creates a certain tension. It intimates, like Tuttle claims, that humans are either defined more by their biological being or by their mind. Tuttle’s vision of humankind, his preference for the reflective human being, and his use of the centaur metaphor

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obscure the complex relationship between biological urge and self-aware contemplation in the human body.

The debate over the character of the relationship of mind and body extends back to antiquity. In the early modern period, many of the faculties of reason and volition we now attribute to the mind were largely attributed to the soul. Eighteenth-century writers transmitted existing philosophical and theological models that prioritized the soul above the body. They also transformed these discourses. In his didactic poem “Über den Ursprung des Übels” (1734), Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777), like Tuttle, highlights the dualistic nature of human beings. Humans occupy a middle link in the famed chain of being between angels and animals as what Haller calls citizens of the heavens and of nothingness. They have one foot in eternity and the other in mortal decay. As such Haller classifies the human being as a “Zweiseutig Mittelding von Engeln und von Vieh, / Es überlebt sich selbst, es stirbt und stirbet nie” (Ambiguous hybrid of angels and of beasts, / It outlives itself, it perishes yet never dies). At the beginning of the eighteenth century, human beings were seen through a theological lens as endowed with a mortal body and an immortal soul. Haller’s poem reflects the common belief that while the body dies, the soul survives for eternity. Haller further juxtaposes the body and the soul in the history of salvation and the moral fate of humankind. In the poem’s Christian anthropology, he notes that persons who veer from moral virtue sacrifice happiness and are prone to corporeal vice (Laster) in temporary bodily indulgence. The “truly” human is rooted in the spirit (Geist) and eschews the purely pleasure-driven experience of this world. But the body is far from being depraved. The body’s senses are central in the perception of truth. In this poem, Haller’s accentuation of sensation as the genesis of thought creates a more nuanced relation--

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